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ABSTRACT

Based on findings from public opinion polls, focus groups, and related academic research, this report explores the challenges facing child advocates in framing issues for public debate. Examining the growing public sentiment supporting governmental involvement in children's issues and general perceptions regarding the causes of current problems, the report highlights public attitudes concerning specific child issues and explores a few promising strategies taken by child advocates to bridge the communication gap. The report suggests that while the American general public cares about children and children's issues and desires some sort of collective effort in the search for solutions, the majority of adults are deeply invested in the personal and parental responsibility, self-sufficiency, and individualism of American philosophy. While the current national sentiment seems to be that children need help, the public asks: What are parents doing to solve the problem? The report concludes that focusing on particular themes may motivate the public to act in a concerted effort, including hailing back to the days when "communities worked for kids," invoking the new millennium, investing in prevention, and avoiding placing blame on politicians and barraging the public with urgent messages. (KB)

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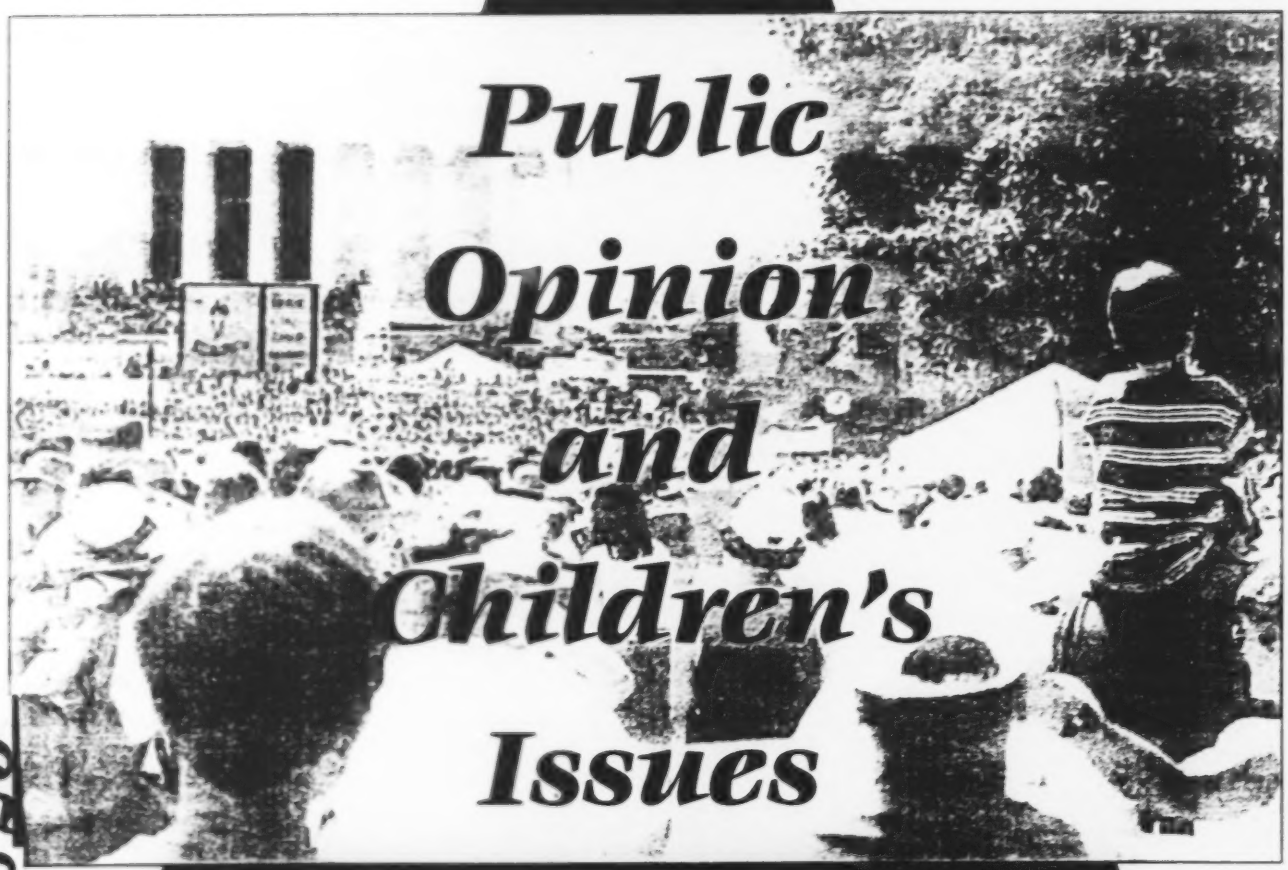

# Public Opinion and Children's Issues

PS 028625

*A special report from the Children's Defense Fund of Minnesota*
*November 1999*

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## INTRODUCTION

> ***In the words of one child advocate, "We cannot achieve our goals for action until people believe that public policy builds on, rather than replaces, parental responsibility"*** (Children's Action Alliance, 1999).

Based on results from public opinion polls, focus groups and related academic research, the following paper explores the challenges facing child advocates in framing issues for public debate. It examines the relatively recent, but apparently growing, public sentiment for governmental involvement in children's issues and general perceptions regarding the causes of current problems (which have a bearing on message formation), highlights public attitudes on specific child issues and explores a few promising strategies taken by child advocates to bridge the communication gap.

In general, the information suggests that while the American public generally cares about children and children's issues and desires some sort of collective effort in the search for solutions, the majority of adults are deeply invested in the personal and parental responsibility/self-sufficiency/individualistic American philosophy. As a result, while the current national sentiment seems to be that children need help, the question the public is asking is: What are parents doing to solve the problem? For many American adults, the line between parental responsibility and public action for children is difficult to draw. In the words of one child advocate, "We cannot achieve our goals for action until people believe that public policy builds on, rather than replaces, parental responsibility" (Children's Action Alliance, 1999).

Before proceeding to a discussion of the findings reviewed here, a few caveats concerning the interpretation and use of focus group results and public opinion polls should be noted. Each method carries strengths and weaknesses that should be considered when drawing conclusions. Focus groups are a means of tracking the in-depth exploration of a particular issue, listening to the language used in natural discussion. Because focus groups are generally small and members may not be randomly selected, their thoughts and opinions are not necessarily representatives of the larger population. Public opinion polls, on the other hand, are conducted with random populations allowing the results to be generalized over a broader population. Question formation and current events, however, often have dramatic effects on polling results and, therefore, opinion polls are generally considered to be "snapshots" of current attitude rather than of more sustained sentiment.

Compounding the issue of opinion poll interpretation and children is the fact that there simply is not much information regarding trends of American attitudes on children's issues. Over the years, there has not been a consistent polling focus on children's issues and, without polling consistency, there can be no trend analysis. One explanation for the lack of data is that when the standardized batteries of opinion surveys were created and streamlined 30 or 40 years ago, children's issues were not included because they were not considered public issues. Children's issues took a big step forward in prominence during the 1992 Presidential campaign. However, experts warn that it is necessary to discern reaction to "candidate sound bites" and "campaign issues" from actual "public opinion" and "public attitude." The two may not always be the same.

## GENERAL FINDINGS

> ***Of all the statistics, public opinion polls and focus groups results considering children and children's issues published in the past several years, the fear and concern adults have regarding the youngest generation of Americans stands out.***

**Seventy-four percent of adults nationwide chose "young Americans without education, job prospects or connections to mainstream American life" as posing a greater threat to America compared to only 18% who chose "foreign nations working against us"** (Princeton Survey Research Associates, 4/97, in Public Agenda 1997)." Of all the statistics, public opinion polls and focus groups results considering children and children's issues published in the past several years, the fear and concern adults have regarding the youngest generation of Americans stands out. Although the Princeton survey did not define "threat" but the general tone of the survey seems to suggest that the "threat" is one to the American social and shared moral fabric.

Criticism of the younger generation by elders is a

long-standing American and, perhaps, world-wide tradition, but it has only been in the past few years that concern over general child well-being has been considered a viable political issue. Prior to the presidential campaign of 1992, children's issues (excepting education) remained primarily in the private sphere rather than the political. During the 1992 presidential campaign, however, polls indicated a shift in the minds of the American public. During the campaign and following Clinton's election, children's issues consistently received high rates of importance when compared to other hot button political issues like health care reform, the economy or the environment. What's more, after the election, the American people expected and had faith that the new President would and could act on his children's agenda (Coalition for America's Children, 1999).

**As we've moved through the '90's, the American public's attitude regarding governmental involvement in children's issues has grown increasingly favorable.** In 1992, 34% of voters considered children's issues extremely or very important. By 1996, that figure had grown to 53% and, more importantly, the same poll showed that 64% of Americans thought government could play a large role in the lives of American children (Kids Campaign, 1996). As evidence of this support, many Americans reported that they would accept increases in their own taxes to increase the nation's financial commitment to children's issues. In 1996, 57% of voters polled were agreeable to an unspecified increase in personal taxes to support children. When the amount was specified at a $100/year tax increase, support for children grew to 64% (Kids Campaign, 1996).

**However, while there may be broad support for action and financial investment, questions remain as to the depth of that support.** When asked to choose between an across the board tax cut for all taxpayers or a targeted tax cut for families with children, 52% of taxpayers chose the former compared with only 40% the latter (Battleground 1998 in Coalition for America's Children 1999). Regarding the federal budget surplus, only 13% would choose to spend that money on domestic programs (primarily education and health care) compared with 49% choosing to cut taxes and 35% paying down the national debt (Associated Press Poll 2/99 in Coalition for America's Children 1999). Contradicting these number however, is a Kids First New York Budget Poll, that showed 74% of New Yorkers willing to give up their state sales tax reduction if the money saved was to be used for children's programs like schools, after-school programming and child care (Citizen's Committee for Children, 1998). Financial apportionment for children's issues is one area where dramatic differences arise between polls. This, again, could be a consequence of question format or current events and illustrates the importance of language and message formation in debates concerning children's issues.

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### Morals Matter Most

***"Values matter most and they matter most of all when the economy is good"*** (Green, R. in Coalition for America's Children, 1998).

Why this contradiction between supporting children and offering financial support? **One of the most consistent findings of opinion polls and focus groups suggests that the real problem behind most children's issues is a combination involving a perceived decline in the moral standards of society and careless parents who put their own needs before the needs of their children — two areas many Americans feel cannot be addressed by increased government involvement.** Given the choice between a decline in moral values or increased economic and financial pressures on families, 51% of adults responded that the real problems in America today are due to a decline in moral values, while only 37% chose economic and financial pressures (Hart and Teeter Research Companies in Public Agenda 1997). Of all the children's issues, "values matter most and they matter most of all when the economy is good" (Green, R. in Coalition for America's Children, 1998). More specifically, 61% of adults agree that youngsters' failure to learn and practice basic values such as honesty, respect and responsibility is a very serious problem (Public Agenda, 1997). Public opinion regarding children and values seems to remain consistent for younger children (older than 5 years) as well as teenagers, across a broad economic spectrum (Public Agenda, 1997). To many adults, all children need more moral education.

In another reflection of the perceived "moral malaise," adults polled for Kids These Days 1997 reported the following items as "very serious" problems facing the youngest generation: kids abusing drugs and alcohol (71%), too much sex and violence

in the media (69%), crime and gangs (62%), failure to learn basic values (61%), and welfare programs that encourage single-parent families and teen pregnancy (58%). Further down the list, kids suffering due to economic pressure on parents was rated as "very serious" by only 44% of those polled, followed by kids lacking the support of strong communities with caring neighbors (40%) and families facing a shortage of government programs that support kids (27%) (Public Agenda, 1997).

**Most Americans point the finger of blame at parents.** While acknowledging the difficulty of raising children in society today (media, necessity for dual incomes, increasing violence, absent fathers, etc.), many Americans still believe that parents are not doing a good enough job of raising children. Sixty-three percent of adults believe couples have children before they are ready for them; 55% of adults think marriages dissolve too easily rather than stay together for the children; about half think that parents fail to provide discipline; 49% believe that its very common for parents to spoil their children. Overall, only 22% of adults say it is very common to find parents who are good role models who can teach their children right from wrong (Public Agenda, 1997). As with low morals, opinions regarding poor parenting vary little across demographic groups.

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton 's use of the "village" concept reflects the American public's hesitation to consider the government as playing an essential role in raising children. Ninety-two percent of those polled believe the schools play an active role in the support and development of children, 87% include extended family members as essential role players, 86% include friends and neighbors, 82% include community groups like Scouts and sports leagues but only 44% consider the government as playing an essential role in the support and development of our nation's children (Gallup Poll 7/98 in Coalition for America's Children 1999). It seems as if many Americans simply cannot imagine a society in which the government has an active interest and responsibility in supporting the nation's children.

## CHILDREN'S ISSUES

### Poverty/Welfare Reform

No issue quite captures the contradictions in the American public's attitude as much as the issue of poverty. American ideology, after all, holds that the nation was built by hard work, sacrifice and determination and that the American Dream is still within reach of anyone willing to put in the effort. However, it is also recognized that circumstances beyond an individual's control can sometimes be too difficult to overcome and that government support is sometimes appropriate and necessary. Given these conflicting attitudes, it is no wonder that we, as a nation, struggle with the poor.

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**Most Americans (71%) reject the notion of an external, systemic cause of poverty, believing instead that blame for one's condition lies with the individual.** Seventy-eight percent agree that "people should take responsibility for their own lives and economic well-being and not expect others to help." **At the same time, Americans do show some compassion. Fifty-one percent of Americans still believe that "the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living in America"** (Kaiser Family Foundation Poll 8/98 in Coalition for America's Children 1999). (According to a Spring 1998 Gallup Poll, "everything possible" includes primarily education and job training rather than income transfers, health care, child care or social programs as means to help the poor.) The degree of that compassion, however, varies in with the economy. In 1989, before the current economic boom, 36% of the public believed that the government should help the poor and only 18% said they should help themselves. Today, after several years of overall economic growth, 32% say the government should help but 28% say the poor should help themselves (Gallup News Service, 4 - 5/98). The common perception seems to be that in good economic times all Americans should be able to find jobs and raise themselves out of poverty.

Devolution, and its center piece —welfare reform— is quickly becoming one of the most studied governmental policies ever enacted in America. For-profit and non-profit, public and private entities are examining welfare reform in an effort to prove or disprove its effectiveness. In several focus groups conducted by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in

September 1998, many goals of welfare reform struck an agreeable chord with the participants. Many participants felt that welfare reform was long overdue and that the step down from federal control to state control was probably a good idea. While some members expressed reservations about the level of commitment particular states may make, it was generally thought that state governments' closeness to the issues made them better informed and more capable of forming specific strategies when compared to the federal government. There was also agreement among the participants that those able to work should work and that the time limits on benefits were reasonable.

Some participants were able to think beyond a simple decrease in the welfare rolls when evaluating the effectiveness of the program to include in their judgment the level of job readiness of individuals and the availability of employment. Job training, education, child care, housing assistance, health care and transportation were mentioned as appropriate and reasonable means of support that should be offered to individuals transitioning off welfare and into work. In regards to children, some participants felt that children might be more likely to be harmed because of the new welfare laws but most agreed it would be due to abuse by parents rather than as a direct result of the reformed system (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998).

## Child Care

**Results of public opinion surveys regarding child care and early childhood education are mixed.** While only 30% of parents with children below the age of three years report difficulty finding child care (Princeton Survey Research, 2/97 in Coalition for America's Children 1999), 44% report it is "very" or "extremely" difficult to find high quality care, 51% report it being "very" or "extremely" difficult to find affordable child care and 55% report it being "very" or "extremely" difficult to find affordable and high quality child care (Harris Poll, 1/99 in Coalition for America's Children 1999). And, while a majority of people are in favor of expanded child care funding efforts (63% in favor of increased federal spending for working families and 71% in favor of tax credits to families earning less than $60,000 – News Index Interest Poll 1/98 in Coalition for America's Children 1999), the issue is not received with much interest by the majority of Americans – ranking below most other concerns adults think children are facing (Dinatale and Hock Research, 1998).

The lack of interest is perhaps associated with the general attitude that child care is primarily a parental responsibility. Sixty percent of those surveyed believe it is the family's responsibility to ensure access to child care, 23% believe business bears responsibility and only 15% believe that the government bears the responsibility (Harris Poll 1/99 in Coalition for America's Children 1999).

In a manner, the results of a Family Research Council survey conducted in late 1997 echo these findings and again underscore the notion that families are best able to take care of themselves without government involvement. The report concluded that the single most desirable pre-school option for child care was the child's own mother followed by care provided by a grandmother, aunt or other family member (Family Research Council of America, 1998). The Family Research Council also reports that 71% of adults surveyed supported a tax relief plan available to all families with pre-school children rather than tax credits or vouchers used specifically for out-of-home care facilities. While some may argue that the Family Research Council is unrealistically interested in re-establishing the traditional family structure with a working father and a stay-at-home mother, there is little doubt that this is but one more example of the American opinion that says raising a child is a parent's responsibility.

**More support for the issue has been found, however, when child care concepts are spoken in the language of education** (Benton Foundation, 1997). Open and equal access to public education has long been considered a right in America, and a cornerstone of American democracy. Parents and lawmakers are deeply invested in the institution of public education and, therefore, framing child care issues as a matter of "education" and enrichment, rather than of "storage for busy parents," seems to cut across political lines and garner more support. As scientists and the American public learn more about the importance of the first several years of infant brain development, the early childhood education framework may increase in effectiveness.

Along the same lines and with a little more resolve, public opinion is strongly in support of expanded after-school programming for youth. Ninety-three percent of respondents, from across the political spectrum, including parents and non-parents, were in favor of "safe, daily enrichment programs for all children" – primarily out of concern for child safety. Moreover, 80% of those surveyed said they would be willing to use additional local, state and federal tax dollars to fund the programs even if it

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raised their taxes $10 per year. Interestingly, and consistent with some general themes presented so far, those surveyed thought the responsibility for organizing and operating the programs should rest with parent groups, community organizations, local governments and local school districts (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, November, 1998).

## Health Care

"Children's lack of health coverage is largely invisible to the public" (Coalition for America's Children 1999). While the majority of Americans (68%) believe that health care costs for families is a growing problem and that the problem of uninsured individuals is also growing (60%), few Americans recognize the problem facing children specifically (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997). In late 1997, half of the American public believed that children were better off (in getting health care) then they were ten years before; and 55% of the public thought that children in America were healthier than children in other industrialized countries – this despite our 23rd world ranking in infant mortality and our 20th and 23rd world ranking in life expectancy for women and men respectively (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 1997). Only 8% of those surveyed point to children (out of a list of specific choices) when asked who has the biggest problem getting adequate health care coverage – this, despite the fact that children are the largest group covered by Medicaid services (Kids Campaign, 1996).

When specifically asked about children's right to health care coverage, 91% believe that children should have the right to health insurance (Robert Wood Johnson 1997 in Coalition for America's Children, 1999) and 83% consider it a "major problem" that too many children lack adequate health care coverage (NBC News Poll 6/98 in Coalition for America's Children, 1999). Perhaps because most Americans are familiar with group health insurance plans, once they understand the need for health insurance coverage for children, they are quick to place responsibility for helping families in the hands of the state and federal governments and business (Kids Campaign, 1996).

When considering policy options for coverage for all currently uninsured people, children, by a large majority, come out first (52% compared with 19% for working uninsured, 12% for long term care and 11% for low-income people). In regards to the scope of possible reform, 45% of those surveyed thought that "major efforts" should be undertaken to provide health insurance for all uninsured children regardless of income; 44% thought "limited efforts" should be undertaken to provide health insurance for children from low-income families; only 8% thought no new laws were necessary. Opinions on how to provide health insurance to uninsured children are split between tax credits to parents to help them purchase private insurance (40%), starting a new health care program (presumably a federal program – 31%), and expanding Medicaid (21%) (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997).

When focus groups discuss health care, the overwhelming sentiment is that health insurance companies are uncaring and greedy, and that everyone is affected. The idea of universal health care is still very popular. But, because of the widespread feeling of need, the "invisible issue" of uninsured children and the easily "explained away" issue of uninsured children from lower-income families (whose parents simply are not working hard enough or are not taking advantage of all the programs available), health care reform specifically for children may be a difficult battle (Coalition for America's Children, 1999). When everybody has a horror story regarding access to health care and insurance coverage, people tend to overlook the sub-groups and consider changes for all.

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## Education

Education consistently rates at or near the top on most surveys of adult attitudes concerning children's issues. **In early 1999, 74% of Americans rated "education" as the top priority for Congress, beating out other perennial favorites like Social Security, crime, health care, and Medicare** *(Pew Research Center Poll, 1/99 in Coalition*

*for America's Children 1999).* In general, adults are not happy with the current state of the American public school system. Many parents question what students are learning and whether or not they are being properly prepared for the future. However, that sentiment is not so strong when parents are asked to grade their own local school system. Nationally, only 18% of adults and 16% of public school parents give schools generally an "A" or "B" grade. When asked to grade local schools however, the "A" and "B" grades percentages improve to 46% (all adults) and 52% (public school parents). Most specifically, fully 62% of public school parents give their own child's school an "A" or a "B" (Gallup Poll 6/98 in Coalition for America's Children, 1999). **Patterns in many polls seem to indicate that the real concern with public education is focused mainly on inner-city schools and is driven by media coverage rather than by personal experience** (Coalition for America's Children, 1999).

Returning once more to values, some surveys indicate that the most important thing public schools should be doing is emphasizing work habits like punctuality, dependability and discipline (Johnson and Immerwher, 1995 in Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, 1996). In a 1993 Gallup poll, 94% of parents surveyed prioritized educational goals that emphasized adult literacy, preparation for the workplace and the development of citizenship capacities over goals that emphasized academic competencies (Gallup, 1993 in Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, 1996).

For many Americans, schools seem to be the one environment in which public support can be provided to children without the encumbrance of deciding whether or not parents are "worthy." Many parents support extracurricular activities – especially community service, community use of school buildings for non-class related activities, and pre-school programs for early preparation of youngsters (Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, 1996). These are ideas that focus on children and provide what is considered necessary for healthy educational and social development – not focused on the needs of the parent.

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Child care and early childhood education advocates have found the educational linguistic framework successful in communicating the importance of quality child care programs and providers. For more information regarding this transformation, see Effective Language for Discussing Early Childhood Education and Policy published in 1998 by the Benton Foundation and the University of Washington.

### Parental Leave

In 1993, President Clinton signed into law the Family and Medical Leave Act guaranteeing new parents up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave and job protection for employees working in businesses that employed more than 50 people. Prior to passage, parental leave was highly studied including public attitudes indicating general public support for the measures. Since that time, however, little public opinion has been collected on the current policy or of paid leave extensions. Attention to the issue may increase in the near future, due to recent proposals from the President and some members of Congress to facilitate paid parental leave.

### Other Children's Issues

Concerns over drugs, crime and violence also receive high scores on public surveys. **Regardless of crime statistics that point to actual reductions in juvenile crime and a murder rate at a 30 year low, crime is described as "rampant" and "out of control" by focus group members.** Crime and violence are often spoken of in terms of an "illness" like cancer or a burning building – something that eats away at an entity. In the case of crime, drugs and violence, the entity is the community. Unfortunately, locked in these metaphors, many focus group members do not see crime and violence as events that can be eliminated or events that can be prevented. They speak of them in terms of reduction. Metaphors that evoked more positive responses, with potential for prevention, framed the issue in terms of gardening and "weeding out" unwanted plants in order to protect the others and, therefore, the whole. Strategies suggested by focus group members for crime and violence reduction/prevention included, to no surprise, better parenting, better values education and less depiction of violence by the media (Coalition for America's Children, 1999).

***Unfortunately, locked in these metaphors, many focus group members do not see crime and violence as events that can be eliminated prevented.***

## STRATEGIES TO ADVANCE CHILDREN'S ISSUES

**Support children rather than support parents.** "Improving the quality of the public schools" was rated as "very effective" by 67% of the those surveyed when asked by pollsters "How effective do you think the following ideas would be to help kids?" After schools (which received the highest percentage), 60% thought "more programs and activities for kids to do after school" was very effective, 55% thought "employers giving parents more flexible work schedules" was very effective, and a "nighttime curfew for children" received a 53% vote of confidence. Closer to the bottom of the list, "increasing the wage and job security of parents" received only 44% of the "very effective" option and only 34% thought "more government funding for child care and health care programs" would be very effective for helping children (Public Agenda, 1997). This, again, is a reflection of people's unwillingness to go directly through parents as a means to support children. Support does seem to be common for children's issues but not in a manner that replaces parental responsibility. Working around this "catch," and conveying the message that there are ways for government to be involved in the support of our children is the challenge facing child advocates today.

Using polling data and focus groups, some child advocates are beginning to hone in on certain themes that may prove to be promising approaches to communicating children's issues through the media and motivating the public to act in a concerted effort. The following themes are presented and analyzed in The Benton Foundation's "Effective Language for Communicating Children's Issues," 1999.

**Hailing back to the days when "communities worked for kids" is a theme to which focus group members respond well.** While they question the ability to actually go back to the way things were 20 or 30 years ago in regards to safety, values, neighborhoods togetherness... (whether myth or not), the community theme touched something in many of them. Relating individual stories from within your own community, neighborhood or city is an important way for people to feel a connection to the events that surround them. Ideally, these stories have broader implications for children in general but the bottom line is that the local connection is made. People are willing to act if they understand a specific need and have a personal connection.

**Conversely, a theme involving the new millennium also evoked strong positive reaction.** Looking ahead and planning for the future allows individuals the opportunity to see a better place – for children and society in general. By seeing today's youth as tomorrow's leaders and being forced to consider current national priorities, many focus group members were able to make the connections between actions today and results tomorrow. It seems that many group members were willing and able to envision positive images of the future and see them as a possibility.

**Investment in prevention is a theme that makes common sense for many people.** Putting a little money in programs today like health care and child care and by improving schools and offering after-school programming as a means to prevent more costly, "out of control" behavior and activity down the road seemed to strike a chord in focus groups. Even when strictly centered on money, many focus group members seemed to understand the idea of spending a little now in order to save more in the future.

**Placing blame on politicians or relying on solutions that involve the actions of politicians does not seem to be very effective with focus groups.** While it seems to be true that children's issues are gaining ground in the political arena, suggesting to adults that children's problems can be addressed by political action is too much of a stretch for many. As previously mentioned, most people lay the responsibility in the hands of parents, not politicians. Many people are simply not ready to believe that a political vote or a policy option will have much direct impact on a specific child.

**Barraging the public with urgent messages to help children in dire need seems to depress group members and leave them feeling hopeless and negative about their ability to do anything for children.** As previously stated, most of the American public understands that children need support, continuing to harp on the extreme conditions and immediate need not only offers no solutions but also makes the task seem impossible. People concerned about children and ready to help in some capacity need to understand that their actions might actually achieve some positive results.

**When working with the press, this last theme is an important one to keep in mind because it seems to work both ways.** Not only are individuals "turned off" by reading negative news articles about children but they also tend to be drawn to positive articles about children and children's programs that have proven to be successful. Offering an example of something that works for children gives people a sense of hope that something is possible and, perhaps, lights the way for them to follow with their own action. On the other hand, it is important not to draw too rosy of a picture lest people begin to believe that children are already being supported by a solid web of programs.

**Aside from using some of these themes, some advocacy groups have found success with spokespersons drawn from the ranks of local law enforcement agencies.** Arizona has had success in using county sheriffs and city police chiefs in communicating the necessity of supporting children. While the efforts have been sporadic, the public response has been positive.

**Part of getting the message out regarding children's issues also involves getting the message out about what it is child advocacy groups actually do.** Whereas "using the media to publicize information about the condition of children" ranked high on the list of what the Massachusetts public thought child advocacy groups should be doing (30% — the highest ranked option), "lobbying the legislature and government agencies" garnered only 10% — below providing direct services (21%) and setting up local community forums to discuss children's issues (16%). In the same poll, respondents were asked which issue they would tackle first if they were the head of a children's organization. Abuse and safety issues were first with 30% of the vote followed by "don't know" with 17%. Parenting and family support showed with a mere 12% (Dinatale and Hock, 1998). With numbers like these it is apparent that many people have not the slightest idea what child advocates are actually doing in their efforts. While it may be true that some child advocacy groups are held in high regard in many circles, the question remains what do those outside of the circle think?

What's more, according to a State Legislative Leaders Foundation Report (1995), many state lawmakers also fail to understand the role advocates play in the political debate. Politicians perceive advocates as elitists and of holding the political process in disdain rather than as sources of information or partners. Some lawmakers also fail to see a specific, cohesive legislative agenda for children and families, hearing instead from a wide variety of speakers with often contradictory messages. After all, everybody is "for" children. And, in our representative form of government, often times lawmakers are unaware of children's issues or effective programs outside of their own district (State Legislative Leaders Foundation, 1995). What these results seem to indicate is that it is not only necessary to educate the public and elected officials on children's issues but it is also important to educate the public and elected officials on the actions and potential of child advocacy groups.

**As we begin another presidential election cycle, "children's issues" will likely again be near the top of the list of importance — at least in terms of speaking points for candidates. Using some of the information provided above and honing some of the language themes presented, child advocacy groups may be able to transform private concern for children into public investment in solutions.**

*For a complete list of the references cited in this paper, please contact the Children's Defense Fund of Minnesota 651-227-6121, or look for this paper on our web site:www@cdf-mn.org.*

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